William Law, Behmenism, and Counter Enlightenment | Harvard Theological Review | Cambridge Core

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Extract

The importance of William Law has never been in doubt. Scholars have regarded him as an extremely effective High Church apologist by virtue of his replies to Bishop Benjamin Hoadly on ecclesiology and eucharistic theology, and as an influential pastoral guide by virtue of the success of his Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life. He is also considered the most notable post-Reformation English mystic by virtue of his later works, written under the influence of the early seventeenth-century Silesian theosophist, Jacob Bohme. This Behmenism, however, has served to reduce the admiration expressed for him. Even sympathetic contemporaries regarded Law's enthusiasm for Böhme as certainly eccentric, and perhaps even more objectionable than that. Retrospection did not blunt eighteenth-century disapproval. Dean (later Bishop) George Home, who was an ardent admirer and indeed disciple of the pre-Behmenist Law, lamented the descent of “one of the brightest stars in the firmament of the church…into the sink and complication of Paganism, Quakerism, and Socinianism, mixed up with chemistry and astrology by a possessed cobbler.” The writers of the Romantic era were far more disposed to acknowledge the value of that from which the eighteenth-century had recoiled as “enthusiasm.”

References

[1] Home, George, The Works of the Right Reverend George Horne (6 vols.; London: Johnson, 1809) 1.213Google Scholar (emphasis in the original). For the character of Home's thought in general, see Aston, Nigel, “The Dean of Canterbury and the Sage of Ferney: George Home Looks at Voltaire,” in Jacob, W. M. and Yates, Nigel, eds., Crown and Mitre: Religion and Society in Northern Europe since the

Reformation (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1993) 139–60Google Scholar.

[2] For Germany, see Walsh, David, The Mysticism of Innerworldly Fulfillment: A Study of Jacob Boehme (University of Florida Humanities Monographs 53; Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1983) 26–35.Google Scholar For England, see Hopkinson, Arthur W., About William Law: A Running Commentary on His Works (London: SPCK, 1948) 71–72Google Scholar , and Walker, Arthur Keith, William Law: His Life and Thought (London: SPCK, 1973) 107Google Scholar.

[3] See, for example, Warren, Austin, "Introduction," in Stanwood, Paul G., ed., William Law: A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life [and] The Spirit of Love (New York: Paulist, 1978) 11–32Google Scholar , esp. 24.

[4] See, for example, , Hopkinson, *About William Law*, 14 and 68Google Scholar ; or Grisbrooke, William Jardine, "The Nonjurors and William Law," in Jones, Cheslyn, Wainwright, Geoffrey and Yarnold, Edward, eds., The Study of Spirituality (London: SPCK 1986) 452–54Google Scholar.

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[7] Broxap, Henry, The Later Non-Jurors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924) 216–17.Google Scholar

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on Several Occasions. By William Law (London: Richardson, 1760) 1-24, esp. 14–21Google Scholar.

[11] Overton, John Henry, William Law, Nonjuror and Mystic …: A Sketch of His Life, Character and Opinions (London: Longmans, Green, 1881) 421–22.Google Scholar

[12] , Hobhouse, *Law and Quakerism*, 274–81.Google Scholar This work was originaly published in 1740. Here it is cited as published in Law's An Appeal to All That Doubt, or Disbelieve the Truths of the Gospel, Whether They Be Deists, Arians, Socinians, or Nominal Christians (London: Innys, 1742) 215–332Google Scholar.

[13] , 272-73, 280-86.

[14] , 282-83.

[15] Brett, Thomas, Tradition Necessary to Explain and Interpret the Scriptures…. (London: Bettenham, 1718) 44–53Google Scholar , esp. 51.

[16] This was the name given to the continuing Usager body after the reunion of the greater part of it with the main (Nonusager) Nonjuring communion in 1732. See Broxap, Henry, A Biography of Thomas Deacon: The Manchester Non-Juror (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1911) 89–101Google Scholar.

[17] See, for example, Deacon to Pierce, 4 May 1750. Chetham's Library, Manchester (Mun. A6. 71). Transcription of a letter in the Scottish Episcopal Church Library, Edinburgh.

[18] See, for example, Law's declaration of faith (*Appeal to All That Doubt*, 279), in which he declared a desire to be found acceptable to God, as if he “had been a faithful member of the *one whole* Church before it was broken into separate Parts.”

[19] , 275.

[2] l[Nathaniel Spinckes], No Sufficient Reason for Restoring the Prayers and

Directions of King Edward the Sixth's First Liturgy (2 vols.; London: Morphew and Bettenham, 1718) 1. 103–4Google Scholar (emphasis mine).

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[68] One of Hutchinsonianism's most readable expositors was Duncan Forbes of Culloden, the Lord President of the Court of Session. See Some Thoughts concerning Religion, Natural and Revealed (London: Woodfall, 1735).Google Scholar There were other enthusiasts in the Kirk.

[69] Brown, “Butler and Deism,” 8.

[70] Quoted in Penelhum, Terence, Butler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 93.Google Scholar

[71] Wilde, C. B., “Hutchinsonianism, Natural Philosophy and Religious Controversy in Eighteenth Century Britain,” History of Science 18 (1980) 1–24CrossRefGoogle Scholar , esp. 4.

[76] , 63 and 65.

[79] , 30-33.

[80] Ia m not, of course, disputing that Roman Catholic thinkers on the European mainland did attempt to assimilate Enlightenment thought. A good example appears in O'Connor, Thomas, An Irish Theologian in Enlightenment France: Luke Joseph Hooke 1714-96 (Blackrock, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1995).Google Scholar It may well be disputed, however, whether such assimilation could ever have been successful. In any case, such efforts were largely confined to a period after Law's.

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